

Biden doesn't think weekend federal shutdown will happen

By K. FREKING/L. MASCARO
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional leaders reached agreement Thursday on a spending bill that would keep the government running through mid-February, though a temporary federal shutdown was still possible this weekend as some Republican senators threatened to slow-walk passage because of the Biden administration's COVID-19 vaccine mandates. The measure would generally keep spending at current levels through Feb. 18 while adding \$7 billion to aid Afghanistan evacuees. If the House approves the measure Thursday, as expected, it would await Senate action before a midnight Friday deadline.

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Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., speaks to reporters after a Democratic policy meeting at the Capitol in Washington, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021.

Associated Press

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Biden doesn't think weekend federal shutdown will happen

Continued from Front

Rep. Rosa DeLauro, chair of the House Appropriations Committee, had pushed for a shorter duration, but Republicans said more time was needed to settle differences on a spending package covering the entire budget year through September.

"While I wish it were earlier, this agreement allows the appropriations process to move forward toward a final funding agreement which addresses the needs of the American people," DeLauro, D-Conn., said in a statement.

President Joe Biden said he has spoken with Senate leaders and he played down fears of a shutdown. "There is a plan in place unless somebody decides to be totally erratic, and I don't think that will happen," Biden said.

Conservative Republicans opposed to Biden's vaccine rules want Congress to take a hard stand against the mandated shots at large employers, even if that means shutting down federal offices over the weekend.

It was just the latest instance of the brinkmanship around government funding that has triggered several costly shutdowns and partial closures over the past two decades. The longest shutdown in history happened under President Donald Trump — 35 days stretching into January 2019, when Democrats refused to approve money for his U.S.-Mexico border wall. Both parties agree the stoppages are irresponsible, yet few deadlines pass without a late scramble to avoid them.

One GOP senator after another, after leaving a private lunch meeting



Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., speaks to reporters after a Republican policy meeting, at the Capitol in Washington, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021.

Wednesday, expressed concern that they will be blamed for even a short shutdown that will not play well with the public. In the Senate, any single senator can hold up proceedings to stall a vote.

But Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, wasn't backing down.

He said Democrats knew last month from a letter that several Republicans would use all means at their disposal to oppose legislation that funds or allows the enforcement of the employer vaccine mandate. He blamed Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., for not negotiating and for ignoring their position. If the choice is between "suspending nonessential functions" or standing idle while Americans lose their ability to work, "I'll stand with American workers every time," Lee said.

GOP senators said the idea is to vote on stripping money that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration would use to implement the requirement

that private employers with 100 or more workers ensure they are vaccinated or regularly tested.

"This is a chance to correct a wrong," said Sen. Roger Marshall, R-Kan., who undertook a similar effort against vaccine mandates during the last government funding standoff.

Schumer said Democrats are prepared to support the spending bill, adding it was "not easy to reach this deal." He said most Republicans do not want a shutdown, but a "few individual Republican senators appear determined to derail this important legislation because of their opposition to the president's lifesaving vaccine guidelines."

"Let's be clear, if there is a shutdown, it will be a Republican, anti-vaccine shutdown," Schumer said. Political backlash over the administration's vaccine mandates has been building for months. The White House sees the vaccinations as the quickest way to end a pandemic that has

killed more than 780,000 people in the United States and is still evolving, as seen Wednesday with the country's first detected case of a troubling new variant. During the last shutdown battle in September, Republicans also tried to halt the vaccine mandate.

Courts have knocked back against the mandates, including a ruling this week blocking enforcement of a requirement for some health care workers.

For some Republicans, the court cases and lawmakers' fears about a potentially disruptive shutdown are factors against engaging in a high-stakes shutdown.

"One of the things I'm a little concerned about is: Why would we make ourselves the object of public attention by creating the specter of a government shutdown?" said Texas Sen. John Cornyn, a GOP leader.

"There's too much chaos in our country right now, too much concern about

omicron. The last thing we need is more confusion and fear," said Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., reiterated Thursday that there will be no shutdown. "We're not going to do that," he said.

The administration has pursued vaccine requirements for several groups of workers, but the effort is facing legal setbacks.

A federal judge this week blocked the administration from enforcing a vaccine mandate on thousands of health care workers in 10 states. Earlier, a federal appeals court temporarily halted the OSHA requirement affecting employers with 100 or more workers.

The administration has also put in place policies requiring millions of federal employees and federal contractors, including military troops, to be fully vaccinated. Those efforts are also under challenge.

Some Republicans prefer an effort from Sen. Mike Braun, R-Ind., to vote to reject the administration's mandates in a congressional review action expected next week, separate from the funding fight.

Separately, some health care providers are protesting the stopgap spending measure. Hospitals say it does nothing to shield them from Medicare payment cuts scheduled to go into effect amid uncertainty about the new omicron variant.

One is a cut of up to 4% that would snap into place next year as part of a broader anti-deficit measure, and the other is a 2% across-the-board reduction that has been on the books for years but was suspended in the coronavirus pandemic. □

Sports betting ads: Industry weighs how much is too much?

By **WAYNE PARRY**

Associated Press

SECAUCUS, N.J. (AP) — If you've turned on a television in the last three years, chances are you've been inundated with advertisements for sports betting, and not only during game broadcasts.

Commercials featuring an emperor addressing the masses, a woman urging bettors to "make it rain" and companies enticing gamblers with the chance to turn a few dollars into a fortune are blanketing the airwaves. Concern is starting to grow over how much is too much.

At the SBC Summit North America, a major international sports betting conference being held this week in northern New Jersey, industry players are voicing concern about possible backlash they fear could lead to harsh government restrictions on such advertising, like what has happened in Europe.

Bill Miller, president of the American Gaming Association — the gambling industry's national trade association — called the current level of sports betting ads "an unsustainable arms race."

"Is it annoying?" he asked. "Is it too much? It is an unsustainable thing."

Miller and others warned that if the U.S. sports betting industry does not restrain itself, it could fall victim to the same sort of govern-



A clerk counts money at the sports book at Freehold Raceway on Oct. 24, 2020, in Freehold, N.J. Associated Press

ment regulations that an orgy of sports betting ads prompted in Europe.

In the U.K., teams are subject to a "whistle-to-whistle" ban on sports betting ads appearing during the broadcast of their games. Italy has banned all gambling ads since 2019, and Spain prohibits sportsbooks from advertising on players' jerseys or appearing as part of stadium names. It also restricts broadcast ads for any other forms of gambling to the hours between 1 and 5 a.m.

So far, the U.S. has not imposed such regulations on sports betting ads. And many in the industry want

to keep it that way.

Jeff Fernandez, vice president of business development and ventures for the New York Jets, said the industry and its professional sports partners need "to make sure we don't have to go to a whistle-to-whistle ban like what happens in the U.K."

Joe Asher, president of sports betting for the gambling technology company IGT, also warned of "a backlash on the advertising going on today, and the excessive amount of it going on."

It's not something that lends itself to self-regulation," said Asher, also the

former CEO of gambling company William Hill. "I do worry about when we get to that phase."

The Jets, like most other pro sports teams, heavily promote their numerous sports betting partners during games, including logos on the building, scoreboard mentions and ads for an in-stadium sports betting lounge.

One of the most frequent advertisers is Caesars Entertainment, whose ads featuring an actor playing Caesar seem to be everywhere. At Thursday's conference, Ken Fuchs, senior vice president of sports for Caesars Digital, echoed

the caution that the industry says it has regarding advertising.

"You do have to draw lessons from the U.K.: you have to self-regulate," he said. "It's about how does a customer interact with Caesars as a brand. It's not about shouting at people: 'Free money! Free money! Free money!' That's what wears people down."

Johnny Avello, director of race and sports book operations for DraftKings, said his company's current level of advertising is working as planned.

"I was at the (train) terminal in Hoboken yesterday and I saw DraftKings on every kiosk and every wall," he said. "And I think it's effective. It works."

PointsBet said advertising is needed to attract new customers and hold onto existing ones. "We have taken a focused view by listening to what our bettors want and reaching them where they are," said Kyle Christensen, the company's chief marketing officer. "We have a philosophy not to spend irrationally but be aggressive and disciplined. It has served us well, made our users happy, and will continue to be our perspective as we look at future advertising budgets."

On Thursday, PointsBet debuted two new ads featuring recently retired New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees telling people how to live their "bet life." □

Biden to attend Kennedy Center Honors, resuming tradition

By **DARLENE SUPERVILLE**

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will be in the house for the Kennedy Center Honors on Sunday. Biden and first lady Jill Biden plan to take their seats in the presidential box in the performing arts center's Opera House for a star-studded celebration of five artists: Motown Records creator Berry Gordy, "Saturday Night Live" mastermind Lorne Michaels, actress-singer Bette Midler,

opera singer Justino Diaz and folk music legend Joni Mitchell.

The Democrat will be the first president to attend the Kennedy Center Honors since 2016. The first lady's spokesperson, Michael LaRosa, confirmed the Bidens would be attending.

President Donald Trump and first lady Melania Trump skipped the show the first three years he was in office after several of the artists who were honored

in 2017, his first year, threatened to boycott a White House reception if the Republican participated.

The 2020 ceremony was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and held earlier this year.

The Trumps also scrapped a traditional White House ceremony for the honorees, which Biden is resuming as well on Sunday. Presidents traditionally host a lighthearted gathering with the honorees at the White House before the



President Joe Biden gestures to reporters as he returns to the White House in Washington, Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021. Associated Press

awards ceremony. Trump long had a conten-

tious relationship with the arts world. □

Christmas tree buyers face reduced supplies, higher prices

By **TERENCE CHEA**

Associated Press

ALAMEDA, Calif. (AP) —

Even Christmas trees aren't immune to the pandemic-induced shortages and inflation plaguing the economy. Extreme weather and supply chain disruptions have reduced supplies of both real and artificial trees this season. American shoppers should expect to have fewer choices and pay up to 30% more for both types this Christmas, industry officials said.

"It's a double whammy — weather and supply chain problems are really hampering the industry," said Jami Warner, executive director of the American Christmas Tree Association, an industry trade group. "Growers have been hard hit by floods, fires, smoke, drought, extreme weather conditions."

Record-breaking heat and wildfires in late June took a heavy toll on Christmas tree farms in Oregon and Washington, two of the nation's largest growers.

Warner could not provide an estimate of how many fewer trees there will be this year but because it takes up to 10 years to grow, the crop loss will be felt for many seasons to come.

The shortage of truck drivers is making it harder and more expensive to trans-



Dale Pine, owner of Crystal River Christmas Trees, prepares a tree for sale at his lot in Alameda, Calif. on Nov. 24, 2021.

Associated Press

port live trees from farms to stores and tree lots.

Warner's advice: "Shop early. If you see something you like, buy it."

At Crystal River Christmas Trees, owner Dale Pine and his nephew Stacy Valenzuela struggled to get enough trees to sell at their tree lot in Alameda. Many of its suppliers in Oregon lost trees in the triple-digit heat wave.

"It was looking pretty grim for a while," Valenzuela said. "Every single

day you're on the phone checking, 'Hey, you got anything? If you do, send it my way.' So a lot of work to get these trees on the ground this year."

Crystal River had to raise prices this year because the costs of trees, labor and truck delivery have all gone up, Valenzuela said. Alameda resident Ian Steplowski came to Crystal River lot to buy a Silvertip tree with his wife and two young kids the day after Thanksgiving.

"We're having shortages of everything and of course it had to take Christmas trees," Steplowski said. "Definitely noticing everything's a bit more expensive this year already." Teri Schaffert heard about the shortage of real trees this year, so she decided to buy an artificial tree for the first time. Almost a week before Thanksgiving, she went to shop at the Burlington showroom of Balsam Hill, which primarily sells its artificial trees online.

"I came in early because I heard in the news that there's not going to be enough fresh Christmas trees," said Schaffert, who lives in nearby San Mateo. Her husband isn't happy about the change. "What else can we do? I have to get ready for the future because I love Christmas. I love to decorate."

But the artificial tree industry is struggling with its own supply troubles as clogged ports and the lack of truckers delay shipments and raise costs, said Caroline Tuan, Balsam Hill's chief operating officer. The company's trees are about 20% more expensive this year and there is less variety.

"We have to bring our products over from our factories (in China), and that has been very challenging," Tuan said. "All of that has impacted us, which means that we have fewer trees to sell as an industry." Worries about drought and drought led David Cruise and his wife to the Balsam Hill showroom to buy their first artificial tree this year.

"In the grand scheme of climate change here in California, this is really the way to go," said Cruise, who lives in Brentwood. "The sooner everybody gets on board with the artificial tree, the sooner everybody's going to enjoy it." □

TSA requires rail and airports to strengthen cybersecurity

By **ALAN SUDERMAN**

Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — The Transportation Security Administration is issuing new directives and recommendations aimed at strengthening the cybersecurity defenses of U.S. rail and airport operators.

The Biden administration said the requirements made public Thursday are part of a broader effort at protecting the nation's critical infrastructure from ongoing cyberespionage and a surge in disruptive ransomware attacks.

"These new cybersecurity requirements and recommendations will help keep the traveling public safe," Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said in a statement. He had previously previewed the new regulations in October.

The new TSA directives require most passenger and freight rail operators to identify a cybersecurity point person, report incidents within 24 hours to the Cybersecurity and Infrastruc-

ture Security Agency, conduct a vulnerability assessment and develop a contingency and recovery plan in case of malicious cyber activity. They go into effect at the end of the year and the TSA said it is making similar changes to requirements for airport operators.

The TSA said it is recommending but not mandating cybersecurity requirements to some smaller and lower-risk rail and airport operators.

The new regulations are similar to ones issued in May for pipeline operators following the Colonial Pipeline ransomware attack that disrupted gas supplies in several states.

Republican lawmakers have expressed concern that the TSA has crafted new cybersecurity directives without enough transparency and input from affected industries.

"We believe that care must be taken to avoid unnecessarily burdensome requirements that shift resources away from responding to cyberattacks to regulatory compliance," a group of

Republican senators said in an October letter to DHS' Office of Inspector General asking for a review of TSA's process for developing new cybersecurity regulations.

Victoria Newhouse, a TSA deputy assistant administrator, said at a congressional hearing Thursday that the agency had worked closely with private industry officials in crafting the regulations. She said that included a classified briefing with freight and passenger rail executives earlier this week to share intelligence reports about cyber threats to their industry and to solicit input on regulations.

The Biden administration has been pushing aggressively for greater private sector reporting of cyber incidents to the federal government. The Justice Department recently indicated it would sue government contractors and other companies who receive U.S. government grants if they fail to report breaches of their computer systems or misrepresent their cybersecurity practices. □

U.S., EU and allies hit Belarus with coordinated sanctions

By LORNE COOK

Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The United States, European Union, Britain and Canada slapped simultaneous sanctions Thursday on dozens of officials, organizations and companies in Belarus, with the EU taking aim at those accused of participating in a “hybrid attack” on the bloc using migrants.

The three countries and the 27-nation EU have targeted Belarus since President Alexander Lukashenko won a sixth term last year in an election that the West and other observers say was fraudulent, and over the security crackdown on peaceful protestors that followed. The U.S. State Department said the U.S. Treasury has “identified three aircraft as blocked property and designated 32 individuals and entities, including Belarusian state-owned enterprises, government officials, and other persons, who support the regime and facilitate its repression.” The EU, meanwhile, imposed travel bans and asset freezes on 17 more people, including senior border guard and military officials, government representatives and judges.



Migrants settle in the logistics center of the checkpoint “Bruzgi” at the Belarus-Poland border near Grodno, Belarus, Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021.

The measures also hit air carriers including state carrier Belavia and travel groups accused by the EU of helping to bring migrants to Belarus with the aim of helping them cross into the 27-country bloc, chiefly through Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Britain said it had imposed sanctions “on eight Belarusian individuals responsible for repression and human rights violations.” It also froze the assets of OJSC Belaruskali,

one of the world’s largest producers of potash fertilizer, which is a major source of revenue for the Belarus government. The State Department said that “today’s actions demonstrate our unwavering determination to act in the face of a brutal regime that increasingly represses Belarusians, undermines the peace and security of Europe, and continues to abuse people seeking only to live in freedom.” At least 8,000 mi-

grants, many of them Iraqis, have entered the EU without authorization this year from Belarus. Lithuania and Poland declared a state of emergency at their borders to stop people crossing. Several people died, trapped in the Poland-Belarus border zone in sub-zero temperatures. With that in mind, the EU targeted Belavia. “Migrants wishing to cross the Union’s external border have been flying to Minsk on board

flights operated by Belavia from a number of Middle Eastern countries, in particular Lebanon, UAE (United Arab Emirates) and Turkey,” the sanctions text said.

Cham Wing Airlines, which operates flights from Syria to Belarus, is also in the EU’s sights. It stands accused of ramping up flights from Damascus to Minsk over the summer and setting up new offices in the Belarus capital to better organize the shuttles.

Also on the list is state tourism company Tsentkurort, which the EU claims helped at least 51 Iraqis obtain visas to Belarus and organized bus transport for them to the borders.

The Hotel Minsk company and Hotel Planeta, which are linked to the Belarus President Property Management Directorate, are accused of lodging migrants aiming to reach the border. The EU also took aim at VIP Grub, a passport and visa service based in Istanbul, Turkey. The sanctions list says the company “organizes trips to Belarus with the explicit intention of facilitating migration to the EU. VIP Grub actively advertises migration to the EU.” □

Associated Press

Russia sends missiles near Pacific islands claimed by Japan

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV

Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — The Russian military has deployed coastal defense missile systems near the Kuril Islands, a Pacific chain also claimed by Japan. The move appeared intended to underline Moscow’s firm stance in the dispute.

The Bastion systems were moved to Matua, a deserted volcanic island in the middle of the chain. Japan claims the four southernmost islands.

Russia’s Defense Ministry posted a video Thursday showing massive missile carriers moving ashore from amphibious landing vessels and driving along the coast of the volcanic island to take firing positions as part of drills.

The ministry said the deployment involved setting up living quarters for personnel, hangars for the vehicles and other infrastructure. The Bastion is capable of hitting sea targets at a range of up to 500 kilometers (270 nautical miles).

The deployment followed a series of moves by Russia to beef up its military presence on the Kuril Islands. In 2016, it stationed the Bal and the Bastion coastal defense missile systems on two of the four southernmost Kuril Islands. In the following years, it followed up by sending top-of-the-line air defense missiles systems there and setting up an air base on the Iturup Island where fighter jets were deployed. Japan asserts territorial rights to the four

southernmost islands of the Kuril chain and calls them Northern Territories. The Soviet Union took the islands in the final days of World War II, and the dispute has kept the countries from signing a peace treaty formally ending their hostilities.

The oval-shaped, 11-kilometer-long (6.8-mile) island where the Russian missiles were deployed hosted a Japanese military base during WWII. After the Soviet takeover of the Kuril Islands, Matua was home to a Soviet military base that was closed amid funding shortages in the wake of the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

Asked about the missile deployment, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Russia has a sovereign

right to deploy its military forces wherever it deems necessary on its territory.

At the same time, he noted that Russia values relations with Japan and remains committed to efforts to negotiate a settlement of the

dispute.

“We maintain a political will to pursue a comprehensive dialogue with our Japanese partners in order to find ways of settlement,” Peskov said in a conference call with reporters. □



In this handout photo released by Russian Defense Ministry Press Service, A Bastion missile launcher is positioned on the Matua Island, part of the Kurils Islands chain, in Russia, Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021.

Associated Press

Report: Israel failed to probe shootings at Gaza protests

By JOSEPH KRAUSS

Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Rights groups said Thursday that Israel failed to investigate shootings that killed more than 200 Palestinians and wounded thousands at violent protests along the Gaza frontier in recent years, strengthening the case for the International Criminal Court to intervene. The Israeli military rejected the findings, saying the “mass riots” organized by Gaza’s militant Hamas rulers were aimed at providing cover for cross-border attacks. The military said alleged abuses were thoroughly investigated, with soldiers held accountable. Beginning in March 2018, Gaza activists organized weekly protests that were initially aimed at highlighting the plight of Palestinian refugees from what is now Israel, who make up three-fourths of Gaza’s population of more than 2 million people.

But Hamas, the Islamic militant group that rules Gaza, soon co-opted the protests and used them to push for the easing of the Israeli-Egyptian blockade imposed on the territory when it seized power from rival Palestinian forces in 2007. Every week for around 18 months, thousands of Palestinians gathered at different



Black smoke from burning tires hangs in the sky as Palestinian protesters hurl stones toward Israeli troops during a protest at the Gaza Strip’s border with Israel, Friday, Oct. 12, 2018.

Associated Press

points along the frontier, often after being bused there by Hamas. Groups of protesters burned tires, hurled stones and firebombs, and tried to breach the security fence.

Israeli snipers fired live ammunition, rubber-coated bullets and tear gas from sand berms on the other side in what Israel said was self-defense, to prevent thousands of Palestinians including potentially armed Hamas operatives from rushing into Israel. Israeli fire killed at least 215 Palestinians, most of

them unarmed, including 47 people under the age of 18 and two women, according to Gaza’s Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights. Hundreds of others were seriously wounded in the demonstrations, which wound down in late 2019. Many were far from the border fence when they were shot.

An Israeli soldier was killed by a Palestinian sniper in 2018 and several others were wounded. A report released Thursday by the Israeli rights group B’Tselem and the Gaza-

based Palestinian Center for Human Rights said the military failed to investigate orders issued by senior commanders and took virtually no action against any soldiers.

As of April, out of 143 cases transferred to military prosecutors by an Israeli fact-finding mechanism, 95 were closed with no further action. Only one the killing of a 14-year-old Palestinian led to an indictment, with the remainder still pending, the report said. It cited figures obtained from the Israeli military through a

freedom of information request.

The indicted soldier was convicted of “abuse of authority to the point of endangering life or health” in a plea bargain and sentenced to one month of community service, the report said.

That’s after more than 13,000 Palestinians were wounded over some 18 months of protests, including more than 8,000 hit by live fire. At least 155 required amputation, the report said. It said the military’s fact-finding mechanism only reviewed 234 cases in which Palestinians were killed, including some fatalities unrelated to the demonstrations.

The Israeli military issued a statement saying it carried out the investigations in a “thorough and in-depth manner” and filed indictments in two incidents in which soldiers were convicted and sentenced to “imprisonment during military service, probation and demotion.”

It said other cases are still pending “due to the complexity of the events and the need for an in-depth examination.” It said “dozens of incidents have been handled” since B’Tselem obtained its figures, which the military said were “outdated.” □



Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg talks at a press conference in Tulln, Austria, Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021.

Associated Press

By FRANK JORDANS

Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg announced Thursday he is stepping down just two months af-

ter taking over from predecessor Sebastian Kurz, who stumbled over corruption allegations. Schallenberg, a former foreign minister, said he would leave office as soon as the conserva-

Austria’s new chancellor resigns; predecessor quits politics

tive Austrian People’s Party names a new leader. Kurz was the party’s long-time leader, and some had speculated he might return as chancellor. But he announced Thursday morning that he was quitting politics entirely to spend more time with his family.

“I’m of the firm opinion that the two posts - head of government and leader of the party with the most votes in Austria - need to be quickly united in a single hand,” Schallenberg said. Schallenberg took office in October following Kurz’s

resignation as chancellor. Austrian prosecutors had announced that Kurz was one of the targets of an investigation into suspected bribery and breach of trust. The Greens, the junior coalition partners in Kurz’s government, demanded his replacement.

Kurz and his close associates are accused of trying to secure his rise to the leadership of his party and the country with the help of manipulated polls and friendly media reports financed with public money. He became the leader

of his Austrian People’s Party and then chancellor in 2017. Kurz said Thursday that he had always done his best to “move our beautiful Austria a little bit in the right direction,” but acknowledged having made some mistakes during his 10-year career.

Still, Kurz insisted: “I’m neither a saint, nor a criminal.” “I’m a human being with strengths and weaknesses,” he told reporters in Vienna, adding that he looked forward to defending himself against the corruption allegations in court. □

Aid official: Afghanistan's crises get 'progressively worse'

By LEE KEATH A

ssociated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) —

Afghanistan is being hit by multiple crises that are "progressively getting worse," with drought, economic collapse and displacement all pushing the population into catastrophic hunger, a senior international aid official said Thursday.

The onset of winter will only increase the pain for Afghans and drive some closer to disaster, warned Alexander Matheou, Asia-Pacific regional director for the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

"Staying warm and putting food on the table is now harder than it was before. And if you fall sick, you are more likely to struggle in trying to access health care," he said in an interview with The Associated Press at the end of a visit to Afghanistan.

"For people who already vulnerable, they will become more vulnerable. For people already in critical condition, it could become deadly," Matheou added.



Alexander Matheou, Asia-Pacific regional director for the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, speaks to the Associated Press, in Kabul, on Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021.

According to U.N. figures from early November, almost 24 million people in Afghanistan, around 60% percent of the population, suffer from acute hunger. That includes 8.7 million living in near-famine. Increasing numbers of malnourished children have

filled hospital wards.

Afghanistan has been suffering from its worst drought in decades since last year, hitting 80% of the country. The drought has reduced crops and wrecked incomes for farming families, driving many to leave their villages. More than

bottom dropped out of the already dilapidated economy.

Sanctions on the Taliban cut off hundreds of millions of dollars in international financing on which the government relied. Billions of dollars in Afghan assets abroad were frozen. Afghanistan's banking system was largely cut off from the world. As a result, the government has largely been unable to pay salaries and jobs across the economy have disappeared.

"Now it's the converging of all those factors that is creating a major humanitarian crisis, which is progressively getting worse," Matheou said.

At Kabul's Ataturk Children's Hospital, the malnutrition ward was filled to capacity with emaciated children.

Lina, who brought her 3-month-old son Osman to the hospital, said she couldn't afford to feed her children. "There's no work. The economy has been wrecked since the Taliban came. Everyone is out of work," she said. □

Associated Press

700,000 people were displaced from their homes this year, whether by fighting or drought, adding to the ranks of some 3.5 million displaced from past years of fighting.

After the Taliban took over the country of 38 million people on Aug. 15, the

Tel Aviv is priciest city, outranking Paris in new report

By AMI BENTOV

Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Residents of Israel's seaside metropolis Tel Aviv have for years complained of how expensive it is, with living costs taking a chunk out of their paychecks. Now a new report affirms their dis-

satisfaction with the prices. Tel Aviv has emerged as the most expensive city to live in, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, a research group linked to the Economist magazine. Israel's financial and cultural epicenter on the Mediterranean Sea, previously

ranked 5th most expensive, has now surpassed other pricey places like Paris and Singapore. Paris, the previous holder of the title, tied with Singapore as second most expensive, and were followed by Zurich and Hong Kong in this year's report.

"Israel is expensive, and in that regard, Tel Aviv is more expensive than other places in Israel because that's where the good jobs are," said Dan Ben-David, head of the Shores Institute for Socioeconomic Research and an economist at Tel Aviv University.

Economists attribute the jump to a strong appreciation of the shekel against the dollar. In its report Wednesday, the Economist Intelligence Unit also pointed to a rise in grocery and transport costs. □



A general view shows the center of Tel Aviv, Israel, Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021.

Associated Press

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Travellers' Choice
2020

Gelatissimo brings Gelato-Daze this Holiday Season

ORANJESTAD □ The happiest time of the year is here, and Gelatissimo has got you covered. This holiday season, Gelatissimo is bringing the holiday spirit with various holiday inspired products and offers to their clients, customers, and gelato-lovers alike.

Gelatissimo also has the exclusive vintage gelato cart, the perfect addition to all



holiday inspired events and happenings. The vintage gelatissimo cart comes to your event, with the option to choose six gelato flavors of your choice, a gelato host serving each attendee with care, and transportation to and from each event. Furthermore, Gelatissimo is bringing a twist to their freshly made waffle cone and basket this year with a dual-colored option, green and red, reminding clients of our pistachio and wild berry flavored gelatos. The jolly dual-colored popsicle has also been added to the list, which comes in vanilla and a pistachio flavor. To top it off, our Mr. Grinch gelato flavor is a must try, with delectable pistachio and holiday-colored sprinkles, it is sure to light-up each person with joy.

Gelatissimo invites everyone to reach out to our sales representative at info@gelatissimoaruba.com for more information regarding all our gelato-daze offerings and products. □



Flu vaccine now available



ORANJESTAD- The Department of Public Health DVG is announcing that this year's flu vaccine, better known as the Flu-shot, is available and ready for administration. The flu shot is primarily given to those at higher risks of getting complications due to influenza.

This group consists primarily of seniors older than 60 years and individuals of all ages who have a chronic illness. Seniors older than the age of 60 years qualify for the free flu vaccine without doctor's prescription while those with a chronic illness will have to show a doctor's prescription when getting their vaccine.

Seniors older than 60 years should make an appointment to receive their flu vaccine by calling 5224239 or 5224241 and should only bring a valid AZV card upon arrival for their flu vaccine. Individuals with a chronic illness younger than 60 years of age should also make an appointment by calling 5224239 or 5224241 for their FREE flu shot but are required to show a valid AZV card and doctor's prescription upon arrival for their flu vaccine.

Individuals younger than 60 years of age with no chronic illness but who wants to receive their flu shot can purchase this at the office of the Section for Infectious Diseases and costs Awg. 20,00. This is available from Monday to Friday between 7:45 am - 11:45 am and from 1:15 pm - 4:15 pm and can only be purchased with debit card. □

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Where the majority of the people decides

by Cdr. Bud Slabbaert

Voters in Switzerland, this Sunday approved by a clear margin legislation which introduced a special COVID-19 certificate that lets only people who have been vaccinated, recovered or tested negative attend public events and gatherings.

Why is this worth to know especially when there are demonstrations all around against vaccinations or restrictions. No, in Switzerland it were not the politicians who decided, it was the Swiss population. How does that work?

Despite claims of some countries that they have the oldest democracy or the most egalitarian democracy in the world, the Swiss are just not the kind of people claiming anything in the publicity, they just make things work in practice. They have what most others don't have, and it is called Direct Democracy. And as for being the oldest of anything, in 1291 the Swiss Confederation was founded which is the precursor of the Switzerland we know now.

Switzerland holds referendum four times a year whereby the Swiss people make the decision. For any



change in the constitution, a referendum is mandatory (mandatory referendum); for any change in a law, a referendum can be requested (optional referendum). In addition, the people may present a constitutional popular initiative to introduce amendments to the federal constitution. The Swiss system of referendums guarantees not only a maximum amount of self-determination to the citizens but also a stability of the political system Switzerland is often envied for.

Switzerland features a system of government not seen in any other nation: direct representation. The absolute and unlimited autonomy of Switzerland is actually its entire electorate. Referenda on the most

important laws have been used since the 1848 constitution.

Any citizen may challenge a law that has been passed by parliament. If that person is able to gather 50,000 signatures against the law within 100 days, a national vote has to be scheduled where voters decide by a simple majority of the voters whether to accept or reject the law. Creating a new law requires 100,000 valid signatures on a petition to get on the ballot. And so, four times per year the Swiss electorate goes to the polls.

But keep in mind as for 'where the majority of the people decides', the level of education of the population and being objec-

tively well-informed is of essence.

Some may think that because of all this, the country is in constant disarray. The opposite is true, it is probably the most orderly country that I know. Plus, it has one of the highest qualities of living and is one of the wealthiest countries. Smack in the middle of Europe it is not member of the European Union. It has its own currency completely covered by gold reserves. Profits made by increased

gold value are used for social security. It has no political conflicts with any other nations, it was never occupied, and it has never conquered. It remains neutral in any way. Only 20 years ago, it became a member of the United Nations.

What do I know about Switzerland? I would not claim anything. It just so happened to that I lived nine years in Switzerland and was Managing Director of a number of small companies, as well as being a business aviation consultant. I simply privately and professionally experienced the Swiss ways.

About:

Cdr. Bud Slabbaert is the Chairman and Coordinator of the Caribbean Aviation Meetup, an annual results and solution oriented conference for stakeholders of 'airlift' in the Caribbean. Mr. Slabbaert's background is accentuated by aviation business development, strategic communication, and journalism. □



Make your stay on Aruba unique! Radisson Blu: trendy, fresh and new



PALM BEACH — There is a new kid in town, or rather: a new lady named Radisson Blu Aruba. Radisson Blu brand originates from Copenhagen, Denmark, where interior design and style live. The upper upscale hotel brand breathes the freshness of clean sheets, eases your mind with white and light wooded tones and pampers you with a luxury, trendy feel. This resort sets itself apart from the rest with huge, spacious rooms, impeccable service, a beach chic appearance and a superb location where everything you need is within walking distance. The buzzing nightlife of Palm Beach is around the corner, the stunning white-sanded beaches a stone throw away! With special opening rates this is your chance to try the lady in blue!

Fabulous facts

132 expansive suites, which feature free Wi-Fi, multiple bedrooms, a spacious living room and dining area, and a well-equipped kitchen. From 1,073 to 2,147 square feet you will have a perfect match for a family or two couples, or have all the space to yourself; it is entirely up to you. For sweeping vistas of Aruba's beaches, upgrade to a suite located on the top floors of the hotel. Blu's suites offer views of the ocean, island, or pool to inspire you while you relax.

Radisson Blu offers more than most standard rooms, you feel you are renting a condominium with the luxury services of a hotel. On your way to the suite the resort shows you already the attention to details: the elevator space is upgraded with corners of huge bamboo poles and trendy light bulbs incorporated in a wall of wooded decoration. The hallways are high and spacious taking you to the hip suite where the design is white with light wood to provide a luxury, contemporary ambiance. The suite's kitchen is fully equipped with an oven, dishwasher

and kitchenware, a big family table ready to invite you to family breakfast or a friends gathering. You feel great, the white interior even accentuates the bright-blue ocean in front of you: inhale this Zen moment from your spacious balcony.

Have a Sunset bite

A delightful breakfast, a scrumptious lunch or a delicious dinner are all possible at Sunset Bistro on the third floor. Here you will find a modern setting by the hotel's infinity pool with amazing ocean views. The chef and his team are clearly dedicated to making you come back presenting to you tasty tapas items or full entrée offerings. One thing has to be said: the hotel's staff makes a difference. Real smiles, real attention and real enthusiasm is what you encounter. Here we are experiencing something new and a new place has new vibes, for you to discover. Go and find out why Sunset Bistro is the next hot-spot for a bite, a drink or more.

Water wellness

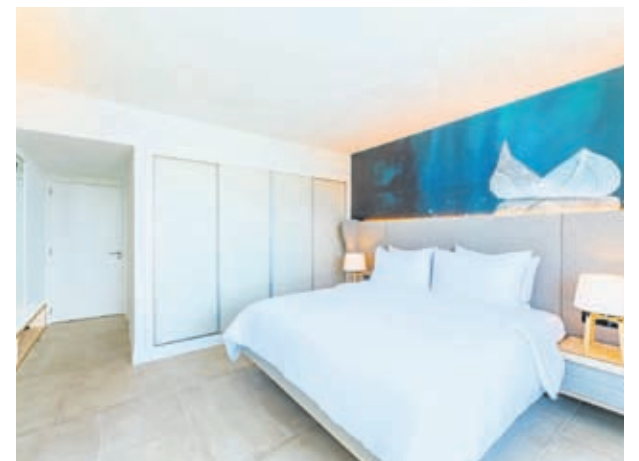
Imagine to wake up in your spacious, stylish suite and after some yawning and stretching you enjoy a cup of Joe on your balcony where your eye catches the huge pool below. This is very inviting and your body needs this as we all know that water makes us feel calm. The only worries you will have is to choose between the infinity pool right in front of Sunset Bistro or the big adult and children's pools centered between the suites and main hotel building. Cindy or one of her colleagues from the Acqua Breeze Pool Bar welcome you with a big smile and Caribbean flair.

That Blu thing

To say it all in a nutshell: this resort has a special something to it, you feel the difference in the attention, the design, the details and the space. To find out for yourself, you need to dive into the experience and most probably you will say like we do: it's a Blu thing.

Radisson Blu Aruba

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Holiday shoppers navigate shortages with mixed results

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO

The Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Like many shoppers, Kathleen Webber understands the struggles of getting the right gifts for her three children this holiday shopping season amid widespread shortages.

She promised to buy her 23-year-old son the Sony Corp. PlayStation 5, but he hasn't been able to get his hands on the popular game console. So now Webber says she may have to get him the next best thing — a used smart phone.

"I just don't know where to get one," the Yardley, Pennsylvania resident said of the PS5. "It's like the Tickle Me Elmos" from 1996.

The holidays have always been defined by disappointing out-of-stock messages on the most popular items. But the pandemic-induced supply chain snarls have created unprecedented shortages across all types of products, from the chips that go into gaming consoles to more mundane items like ties and pajamas. That has many customers buying early as shortfalls are only expected to worsen as the holiday season moves into the final stretch. Some shoppers like Danny Groner aren't being choosy.

When Groner realized he needed a new tie for a wedding in early December, he found the perfect answer on Amazon: a \$7.99 skinny black and white tie that he was told would ar-



Gift cards for food and beverage businesses sit on display for sale at a retail store in Dallas, Tuesday, Nov. 16, 2021.

Associated Press

rive in time.

But four days later, he received an email message informing him the tie was out of stock and it wouldn't arrive until January. That sent the New York publicist into a fit of desperation and forced him to go back on the site for any tie that would meet the fast approaching deadline. "It didn't matter to me whether it was ugly — it got here," says Groner, who settled on a yellow and blue checkered tie.

On Cyber Monday — the biggest online shopping day of the year — the prevalence of out-of-stock messages rose 8% compared to a week earlier, according to Adobe Digital Economy Index. From November 1 through November 29, the number of out-of-stock messages soared

close to twofold compared with pre-pandemic levels in January 2020 and up 258% from November 2019, Adobe said.

In response, stores like Kohl's have added new online tools to help push shoppers to substitutes if their top choice is gone. Shipt, a grocery delivery service owned by Target, now offers customers substitute suggestions based, in part, on their prior shopping behavior. And technology company Obsess, which creates virtual shopping experiences for such brands as American Girl and Ralph Lauren, added tools that recommend next best items if the shopper clicks on something that's out of stock; it also offers quizzes to help figure out what they would like.

But there are plenty of

shoppers who won't be happy with alternatives, particularly when it comes to must-have toys like Spinmaster's Gabby's Dollhouse Purrfect Playset and Moose Toys' Magic Mixies Magical Misting Cauldron. Some are resorting to eBay where they're paying three times more than the suggested retail price. Experts also believe they will turn to more to gift cards if they don't like what they see.

A lot is at stake for retailers. If shoppers can't get what they want at one store, they could go to another competitor or just not buy an alternative. That could dampen holiday sales, which are expected to be up anywhere between 8.5% to 10.5% for the November-December period, compared with the year-ago period, according to

the National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade group.

Experts say that the pandemic trained shoppers to try new brands and items when their first choice couldn't be found. For example, when consumer product makers and essential retailers saw a huge run on toilet paper in the spring of 2020, it forced shoppers to abandon the brands they'd been loyal to and seek out alternatives.

Things got more complicated as Americans enthusiastically emerged from months of pandemic lockdowns, eager to shop again. Retailers and manufacturers of all types were caught flat-footed as they also contended with a shortage of containers that carry the goods, bottlenecks at ports and a shortage of workers needed to unload the goods. And global chip shortages have increased the list of hard-to-find gadgets. Many industry analysts believe the supply chain issues will not be resolved until next year. Victoria's Secret told analysts last week that nearly 50% of its holiday merchandise is in transit. It said it ordered 200 million units of merchandise for the fourth quarter holiday period, but 90 million of those items are delayed because of supply chain clogs.

"Today, we have 30% less PJs in our system than we had a year ago," Victoria's Secret CEO Martin Waters told analysts. "That is clearly bad for business." □

Dollar General opening more \$5 or less Popshelf stores

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN

AP Business Writer

Getting more bang for your buck used to be the mantra of dollar store shoppers everywhere, but times are changing - and prices are rising.

As consumers continue to contend with escalating prices for food, clothing and other items thanks to inflation, discount retail chains like dollar stores

are rethinking their pricing strategies. Dollar Tree announced last month that it will be boosting prices to \$1.25 for most of its products. And now Dollar General is looking to roll out more of its Popshelf stores, where most items cost \$5 or less.

Dollar General said Thursday that it anticipates nearly tripling the number of Popshelf stores it has

by next year and plans to have about 1,000 Popshelf locations by the end of fiscal 2025.

Popshelf stores offer items such as beauty and seasonal products, toys, home décor and arts and crafts. Dollar General initially unveiled the Popshelf concept in October 2020. By May, the Goodlettsville, Tennessee-based company had plans to open ap-



In this Aug. 3, 2017, file photo the Dollar General store is pictured in Luther, Okla.

Associated Press

proximately 25 Dollar General and Popshelf combination stores, and up to an additional 50 Popshelf locations in various mar-

kets by the end of fiscal 2021. There are currently 36 Popshelf stores open, according to the Popshelf website. □

CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 42 Snowy bird
 - 1 Cavalry weapon
 - 6 "Check it out!"
 - 11 "Hello" singer
 - 12 Low joint
 - 13 Store for the future
 - 14 Substantial
 - 15 In the past
 - 16 Holiday lead-in
 - 18 Overly
 - 19 Racket
 - 20 Ozone, e.g.
 - 21 Go astray
 - 22 Soaked
 - 24 Bassoon's kin
 - 25 Binary system
 - 27 Weaving need
 - 29 Takes an oath
 - 32 Hockey's Bobby
 - 33 Letter before omega
 - 34 Sturgeon eggs
 - 35 Boulder
 - 36 Pig out
 - 37 Ho of Hawaii
 - 38 Ring
 - 40 Hard journeys

DOWN

- 1 Leafy lunches
- 2 Slow movement
- 3 2003 Angelina Jolie film
- 4 Yale rooter
- 5 Misplays at cards
- 6 Toy store section
- 7 Small bill
- 8 Ollie performers
- 9 Matador's foe
- 10 Pooh's pal
- 17 Hudgens of "High School Musical"
- 23 Block up
- 24 Need to pay
- 26 Poked fun at
- 27 Changing room fixture
- 28 Marigold color
- 30 League newbie
- 31 Detects
- 33 Trappers' wares
- 39 Rent out
- 41 Old auto

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Yesterday's answer

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AXYDLBAAXR
is LONGFELLOW

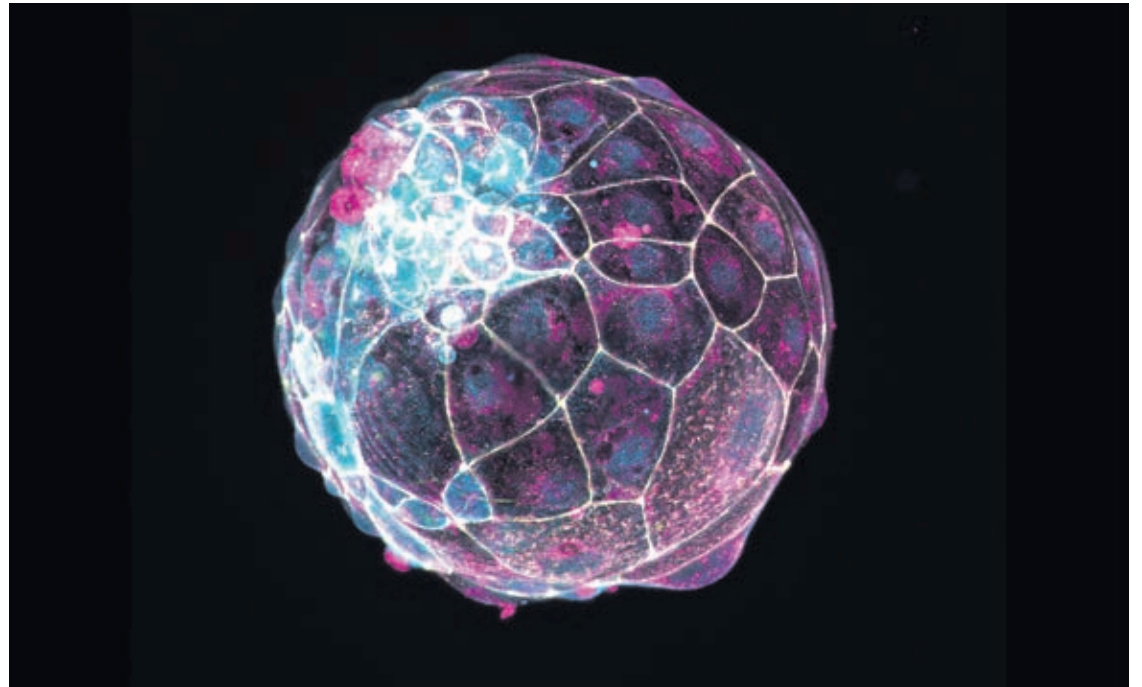
One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

12-3

CRYPTOQUOTE

M W R Y H M N I A F P H N K D
C F A R K W Q R H L K R Y F M
D K N D K R R H M N R Y K G F A R F M U
C W D D J H M N F P W V R R Y K
Q V R V D K — T F L K A L K D K U H R Y

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: THE BEST WAY TO GET A PUPPY IS TO BEG FOR A BABY BROTHER — AND THEY'LL SETTLE FOR A PUPPY EVERY TIME. — WINSTON PENDLETON



This image, provided by the Institute of Molecular Biology of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, shows a human "blastoid" created in a lab.

Associated Press

Scientists use stem cells to create models of pre-embryos

By LAURA UNGAR
AP Science Writer

Scientists are using human stem cells to create a structure that mimics a pre-embryo and can serve as a research alternative to a real one.

They say these "blastoids" provide an efficient, ethical way to study human development and pursue biomedical discoveries in fertility and contraception. The latest effort was detailed Thursday in the journal Nature. The structures aren't embryos, but scientists nevertheless didn't let them grow past two weeks in deference to longstanding ethical guidelines.

A blastoid is a model for a blastocyst, a ball of cells that form within a week of fertilization and are about the width of a hair. Nicolas Rivron, a researcher at the Austrian Academy of Sciences and one of the authors of the Nature paper, said the models are "a fantastic alternative" to hu-

man embryos for research, partly because donated embryos are hard to obtain and manipulate in the lab.

"It is extremely difficult to use such human embryos to discover any molecules, genes, principles that might allow us to better understand development and also make biomedical discoveries," Rivron said.

But lab-created stand-ins can be made, altered and studied in big numbers, and would complement embryonic research, he said.

For example, what researchers learn studying blastoids could be used to develop contraceptives that don't include hormones.

It's not the first time scientists have created a human blastoid, noted Magdalena Zernicka-Goetz, an expert in stem cell biology at the University of Cambridge who wasn't involved in the latest study. But "every single step is significant," improving ef-

ficiency as researchers try to master the model, she said. To create the blastoids, Rivron and his colleagues used two different types of stem cells: either embryonic stem cells from previously established cell lines or stem cells reprogrammed from adult cells, such as skin cells. No new embryonic cell lines were made for the research.

In the future, the stem cells reprogrammed from adult cells are likely to become the new standard in research, he said, but established embryonic cell lines are necessary now because they "are still the ultimate reference." He said blastocysts were cultured separately to compare them side-by-side with lab-created structures.

The study showed blastoids reliably replicated key phases of early embryo development. When they were placed in contact with cells from the lining of the uterus that had been stimulated with hormones, about half attached and started to grow in the same way blastocysts would.

Rivron said researchers stopped their growth after 13 days and analyzed the cells. At that point, he said, the collection of cells didn't reflect a 13-day-old embryo; they weren't growing enough or organizing as well. □

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New data suggests 1 in 44 U.S. children affected by utism



A student arrives as the sun rises during the first day of school on Wednesday, Aug. 4, 2021 at Freeman Elementary School in Flint, Mich.

Associated Press

AP Medical Writer

New autism numbers released Thursday suggest more U.S. children are being diagnosed with the developmental condition and at younger ages.

In an analysis of 2018 data from nearly a dozen states, researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that among 8-year-olds, 1 in 44 had been diagnosed with autism. That rate compares with 1 in 54 identified with autism in 2016.

U.S. autism numbers have been on the rise for several years, but experts believe that reflects more awareness and wider availability of services to treat the condition rather than a true increase in the number of affected children. A separate CDC report released Thursday said that children

were 50% more likely to be diagnosed with autism by age 4 in 2018 than in 2014. "There is some progress being made and the earlier kids get identified, the earlier they can access services that they might need to improve their developmental outcome," said CDC researcher and co-author Kelly Shaw. Geraldine Dawson, director of Duke University's Center for Autism and Brain Development, said the new estimate is similar to one found in research based on screening a large population of children rather than on those already diagnosed. As such, she said it may be closer to reflecting the true state of autism in U.S. children than earlier estimates. The CDC reports are based on data from counties

and other communities in 11 states some with more urban neighborhoods, where autism rates tend to be higher. The rates are estimates and don't necessarily reflect the entire U.S. situation, the authors said. Autism rates varied widely from 1 in 26 in California, where services are plentiful, to 1 in 60 in Missouri. Overall, autism prevalence was similar across racial and ethnic lines, but rates were higher among Black children in two sites, Maryland and Minnesota. Until recently, U.S. data showed prevalence among white children was higher. At a

third site, Utah, rates were higher among children from lower-income families than those from wealthier families, reversing a long-standing trend, said report co-author Amanda Bakian, a University of Utah researcher who oversees the CDC's autism surveillance in that state.

Bakian said that likely reflects more coverage for autism services by Medicaid and private health insurers. □

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Fire Dept.	115
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Prof. Taxi	588 0035
Taxi D.T.S.	587 2300
Taxi Serv. Aruba	583 3232
A1 Taxi Serv.	280 2828

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American Airlines	582 2700
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Jet Blue	588 2244
Surinam	582 7896

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Narcotics Anonymous
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Review: Leaving the Children of God 'sex cult'

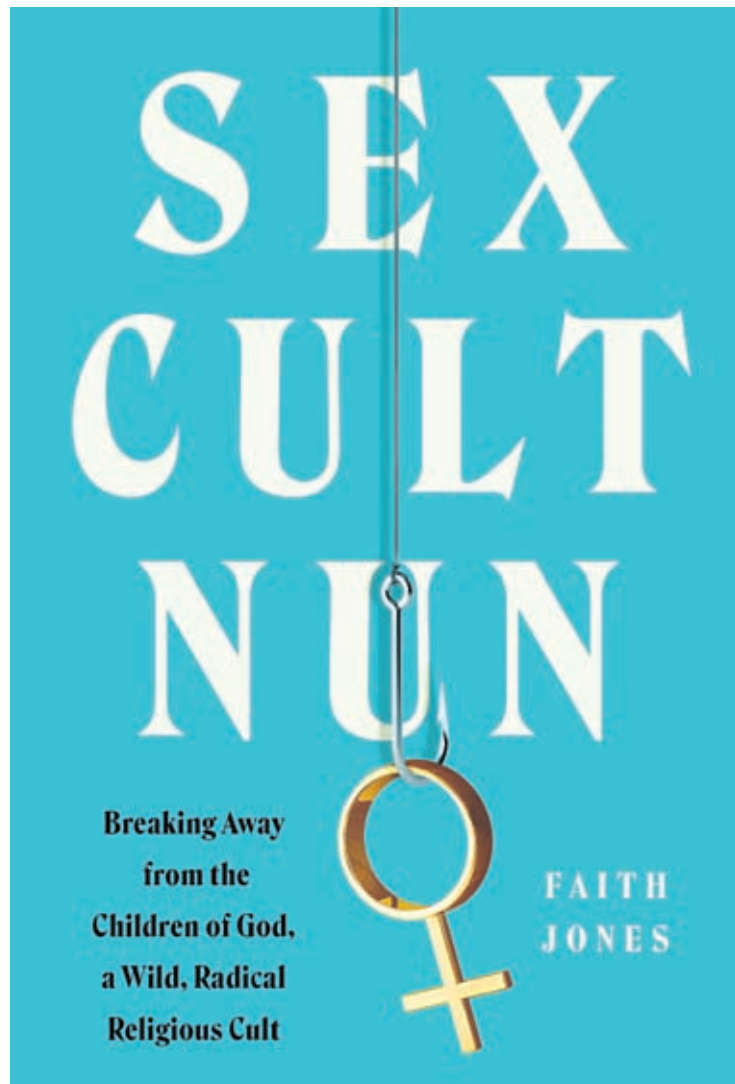
By **MAE ANDERSON**

Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) —Faith Jones' vivid memoir "Sex Cult Nun" chronicles her 23 years in the infamous Children of God cult and her slow journey to leave. Born into the cult in 1977 in Hong Kong, Jones was cult royalty, the granddaughter of leader David Berg.

One of the first religious sects to be dubbed a "sex cult," The Children of God has received media attention over the years, including a "Children of God" documentary (1994) and the "Children of the Cult" Discovery+ series (2021). Actors River Phoenix and Rose McGowan were famously members. And writer Lauren Hough addresses her experience in her book of essays "Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing."

But the length of Jones' tenure in the cult and her position as the granddaughter of Berg gives her a unique perspective on why its nefarious teachings compelled tens of thousands of people to join over its decades of existence. She recalls some happy moments, like playing with friends and animals at the farmstead in Macau where



This cover image released by William Morrow shows "Sex Cult Nun: Breaking Away from the Children of God, a Wild, Radical Religious Cult" by Faith Jones.

Associated Press

she lived as a child, and triumphing over difficult chores and punishments, even as she recounts being

abused and manipulated in the name of "The Family" time and time again. Berg was an elusive lead-

er, hiding his whereabouts and communicating his beliefs with followers mostly through illustrated newsletters — Jones never met her own grandfather. The gospel he preached was focused on utter devotion to his teaching about the word of God. But Berg's addition was the "Law of Love." In his doctrine, sex was godly and should be encouraged between everyone, including children and adults. For women and girls to say no to a Family member meant being labeled "unyielding" and going against God.

Jones was a true believer, and tried to pray her way out of her revulsion at the sexual abuse she endured and the punishments she had to go through to be "rehabilitated" for minor infractions like not smiling enough. She even reports on herself when she is racked with guilt for kissing a "Systemite" — a non "Family" member.

But slowly she began to see a world outside of the cult, through clandestine novels like "The Secret Garden," and a glimpse at American education when her parents visit the U.S. She begins to question why being

in The Family makes her so unhappy even though she is so devout.

There's no dramatic exit for Jones. At 23, she decides to go to college, and informs The Family she is leaving. Even though she has little formal education, her experience growing up in six countries and learning three languages wows her entrance interviewer at Georgetown, where she gets a scholarship. She goes on to U.C. Berkeley law school. But while she wins educational success, it takes longer for her to fully grasp how indoctrinated she was by the Children of God. When she does, she questions how her parents could have put her through such abuse. They experienced life outside the cult, she was born into it. Ultimately, she realizes they were as indoctrinated as she was. "Lies aren't always intentional... you don't have to be conscious that you're doing something wrong to be wrong. Abusers can believe they are acting out of 'love'" she writes. "The guise of love and freedom and nature is a beautiful smoke screen that often masks violations and manipulation." □



This image released by Neon shows a scene from the film "Flee." **Associated Press**

By **LINDSEY BAHR**

AP Film Writer

Filmmaker Jonas Poher Rasmussen was 15 when he encountered a new face on a local train in his sleepy Danish town. It was the kind of place where immigrants couldn't help but stand out, but Rasmussen noticed this kid's style first. He had some and most people there didn't.

Rasmussen knew the boy, Amin (a pseudonym), lived

with a foster family down the street and had come from Afghanistan, but he didn't know much else. Riding together to high school daily, they became friends eventually. Amin didn't talk about his past or his family and Rasmussen didn't probe — they were just kids after all. It would take some 20 years for Amin to start telling Rasmussen, then a working filmmaker, the real story of his childhood. The

Review: Animated doc 'Flee' tells young refugee's journey

result is the animated documentary "Flee," and it's easily one of the best films of the year. Amin and his family fled Kabul in the 1980s. They hoped to find asylum in Sweden but for five years faced impossible challenges and setbacks and kept finding themselves in Russia and under constant threat of deportation or exploitation by the police. Eventually, 15-year-old Amin landed alone in Denmark. "Flee" introduces Amin as an adult who is gearing up to tell his story to the world for the first time. He's an accomplished scholar with a longtime partner who wants to get married and buy a house, but Amin is reticent to put himself first. The visuals look as though

we've snuck in on a therapist's session, and the experience of hearing his story come out is not so different either. Amin has become so accustomed to hiding his truth, including the fact that he's gay, that he's actually a fairly unreliable narrator at first, lying to the audience and the director. But Rasmussen sees that his friend won't be able to actually live his life without confronting his past. So, with closed eyes, Amin takes us back to the five years he's spent a lifetime repressing.

As in "Waltz with Bashir," animation in "Flee" (literally) illustrates the specifics of Amin's journey, taking us to places where we wouldn't have had access, like the

underbelly of a ship full of refugees trying to cross the Baltic Sea to Scandinavia. But it also gives us access to private moments, like playing volleyball in Kabul, seeing Jean-Claude Van Damme on television and realizing it's a crush, or going to his first night at a gay bar. There is a welcome lightness to these moments too, which comes as a relief. Amin's attempts to get to the West with his mother and brother are harrowing enough to give you an ulcer. Rasmussen spent years interviewing Amin before starting work on the film. He also includes some actual newsreel footage, which helps remind the viewer that these events were very real. □

Tim Tebow would 'love' to coach but focused on charity work

By ROB MAADDI
AP Pro Football Writer

Tim Tebow was visiting with Auburn athletic director Allen Greene along with fellow members of ESPN's SEC Nation crew when he got a text message from a friend last week congratulating him on becoming the head coach at Florida.

"I'm like: 'What do you mean? Congrats on the new gig. What is happening?'" Tebow said on the AP Pro Football Podcast.

The confusion began when former NFL quarterback and current ESPN analyst Robert Griffin III said the Gators should hire Tebow to replace Dan Mullen, who was fired on Nov. 21.

"He thought it was like a done deal or something," Tebow said of his friend.

"And I was like, 'Oh, no.' I thought it was nice and it was cool of RG3 to think of me. He's such a nice guy and we've gotten along over the years. But it was funny, and he definitely made a lot of people reach out to me for a couple of days."

Griffin doubled down on his suggestion that Florida should hire one of its most popular alums.

"I think what people have to realize is in today's age with the transfer portal and just how different these kids are being coached and recruited, if you want to make a splash, you have to look in different areas,"



SEC Nation host Tim Tebow listens to his co-hosts during the SEC Nation broadcast in Lexington, Ky., Saturday, Oct. 9, 2021.

Griffin told the AP.

"So it might not be that Tim Tebow is the answer for the Gators, and he's going to come in and turn the program around. But what he will do is he'll bring excitement to the program, recruits will want to come play for him. And right now, they're struggling to compete in recruiting against Nick Saban, Jimbo Fisher, Kirby Smart. And those guys are not slowing down, right?"

"So that's the thought process behind going after a guy like Tim Tebow and say: 'All right, we're going to surround you with a great staff. We need you to

be the motivator and the leader and go get these guys to want to be a part of the Florida Gator franchise and the traditions again.' And that, to me, is worth it." Griffin also mentioned Notre Dame defensive coordinator Marcus Freeman and Pittsburgh Steelers wide receivers coach Ike Hilliard should be considered for the job.

Tebow led Florida to a pair of national championships and was the 2007 Heisman Trophy winner. He said he has thought about coaching at some point, but he doesn't want to take time away from his charitable work.

Associated Press
"I've considered it, and there would definitely be a passion behind it," Tebow said. "I think the hardest thing for me is there's so many things that I am very passionate about. No. 1 being everything that we're doing at TTF (Tim Tebow Foundation). Now we're in 67 countries and we're building more hospitals right now and we're building more special needs orphanages and villages and rescuing girls from trafficking. And, I just am so passionate about that. I would love to coach and love to support, build culture and love on student athletes, but I think it would be hard.

I know if I did that, I would be so all-in, and it would really be hard to do some of the other things that I'm so passionate about as well." Tebow and his foundation have been fighting trafficking since 2013.

"We just believe it's one of the greatest evils in the world today, and it's not just something that is happening overseas or in a Third World country or when you turn on the movie 'Taken,'" Tebow said.

"It's happening in our backyard, it's happening in our schools, it's happening in our communities. It's everywhere. ... This is going to take an army of people that say: 'No longer on our watch are we going to sit back and let this happen or watch this happen or support it happening.'"

Tebow attempted to return to the NFL as a tight end for his former Gators coach Urban Meyer and the Jacksonville Jaguars over the summer after nearly six years away from the game. But his comeback bid ended following one preseason game.

A new partnership with the Heisman Trophy Trust is among the 34-year-old Tebow's latest venture. Campus Legends, which is co-founded by Tebow, is working with the Heisman Trophy Trust and Heisman athletes on their first officially licensed NFT/digital collectibles. □

New report shows college athletes still improving grad rates

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — New graduation numbers show college athletes continue to graduate at higher rates than overall students.

On Thursday, the NCAA released its annual Graduation Success Rate report that shows college athletes who entered school from 2011-12 through 2014-15 graduated at a rate of 89%, 21 points higher than the federal graduation rate — and well above the 80% goal set by late NCAA President Myles Brand when he first introduced the report in

2002.

The single-year calculation of 90% also matched last year's record high.

NCAA numbers include athletes who remain academically eligible and graduate after transferring. The federal numbers do not count students who graduate from a school other than the one where they first enrolled.

The two-decade comparisons were up across the board.

The overall rate increased by 16 percentage points

over the past 20 years while the percentage of Black athletes earning diplomas went from 56% to 80%; 94% of Hispanic athletes also are now graduating, a 13-point increase since 2002.

"Today's announcement proves college athletes take seriously their status as students," NCAA President Mark Emmert said. "We celebrate them and their achievements and will continue to support them as the NCAA modernizes its rules to benefit them."

Critics contend the NCAA



Auburn guard K.D. Johnson (0) reacts after a turnover by Central Florida during the first half of an NCAA college basketball game Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021, in Auburn, Ala.

Associated Press

numbers do not accurately reflect actual graduation results.

Individual sports have seen similar jumps when compared to 2002. □

Manfred, Clark divergent views point to lengthy lockout

By **STEPHEN HAWKINS** and **RONALD BLUM**

AP Baseball Writer

ARLINGTON, Texas (AP) —

Hours into Major League Baseball's first work stoppage in 26 years, Commissioner Rob Manfred and union head Tony Clark presented diametrically opposed views of each side's negotiating positions that point to a lengthy lockout.

In separate news conferences less than a day into baseball's ninth work stoppage, Manfred said the union's proposal for greater free agency and wider salary arbitration would damage small-market teams.

Clark, the first former player to head the union, accused Manfred of "misrepresentations" in his letter to fans explaining the lockout, and said "it would have been beneficial to the process to have spent as much time negotiating in the room as it appeared it was spent on the letter."

"It's unnecessary to continue the dialogue," Clark said of the lockout. "At the first instance in some time of a bumpy water, the recourse was a strategic decision to lock players out." The dispute threatens the start of spring training on Feb. 16 and opening day on March 31.

In many ways, after 26 1/2 years of labor peace the sides have reverted to the bitter squabbling that marked eight work stoppages from 1972-95, including a 7 1/2-month strike that wiped out the 1994 World Series.

Owners locked out players at 12:01 a.m. Thursday following the expiration of the sport's five-year collective bargaining agreement.

"If you play without an agreement, you are vulnerable to a strike at any point in time," Manfred said. "What happened in 1994 is the MLBPA picked August, when we were most vulnerable because of the proximity of the large revenue dollars associated with the postseason. We wanted to take that option away and try to force the parties to deal with the issues and get an agreement now."



Major League Baseball commissioner Rob Manfred speaks during a news conference in Arlington, Texas, Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021. Associated Press

Players gained salary arbitration in 1974 and free agency two years later, and most of the previous disputes centered on the rise of big salaries caused by both, along with demands, mostly by small- and middle-market owners, to control costs and increase their competitive ability.

Management gained an ever-increasing series of restraints over the last two decades, such as a luxury tax on high payrolls, leading to a decrease in average salary during the latter years of the most recent labor deal.

Now players want more liberalized free agency and arbitration, leading to a confrontation.

"It's a whole list of topics that they've told us they will not negotiate," said Bruce Meyer, the players' chief lawyer. "They will not agree, for example, to expand salary arb eligibility. They will not agree to any path for any player to achieve free agency earlier. They will not agree to anything that would allow players to have additional ways to get service time to

combat service-time manipulation. They told us on all of those things they will not agree."

Since 1976, players can become free agents after six seasons of major league service. The players' association proposed starting with the 2023-24 offseason that it changes to six years or five years and age 30.5, with the age in the second option dropping to 29.5 starting in 2025-26.

Players want arbitration eligibility to decrease to two years of service, its level until the mid-1980s.

Central to the strife is the union's anger over a larger number of teams in recent seasons jettisoning veterans in favor of rebuilding while accumulating prospects. Teams sometimes conclude rebuilding — the players call it tanking — is a preferred strategy for long-term success, even though it can rankle their fans.

"We feel our proposals would positively affect competitive balance, competitive integrity," Meyer said. "We've all seen in recent years the problem with teams that don't seem to be trying their hardest to

win games or put the best teams on the field."

In the signing scramble ahead of the lockout, teams committed \$1 billion to contracts on Wednesday, including six nine-figure agreements that raised the total to nine in the last month and total spending to \$2.5 billion since Oct. 1. "The fact that this year there seems to be more activity sooner by clubs in free agency than a normal year raises more questions than it answers about all the other years," Meyer said. "One good week of free agency doesn't address all the negative trends that we've seen."

MLB would keep existing free-agency provision or change eligibility to age 29.5.

"We already have teams in smaller markets that struggle to compete," Manfred said. "Shortening the period of time that they control players makes it even harder for them to compete. It's also bad for fans in those markets. The most negative reaction we have is when a player leaves via free agency. We don't see that, making it earlier, avail-

able earlier, we don't see that as a positive."

Clark spoke at the hotel where negotiations broke off and Manfred about 14 miles away at Globe Life Field, home of the Texas Rangers.

"The players' association, as is their right, made an aggressive set of proposals in May, and they have refused to budge from the core of those proposals," Manfred said. "Things like a shortened reserve period, a \$100 million reduction in revenue sharing and salary arbitration for the whole two-year class are bad for the sport, bad for the fans and bad for competitive balance."

An agreement by early-to-mid-March is needed for a full season.

Negotiations have made little to no progress since they began last spring. Manfred said a lockout was management's only tool to speed the process.

"People need pressure sometimes to get to an agreement," Manfred said. "Candidly, we didn't feel that sense of pressure from the other side during the course of this week." □